



05. 1 Thessalonians 2:1-20

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1 Thessalonians 2:1-2

You yourselves know, brothers and sisters, that our coming to you was not in vain, but though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi [Acts 16:22-24], as you know, we had **courage** in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition.

His courage was ‘in our God’. It did not come from his own strength:

‘By the grace of God I am what I am’ (1 Corinthians 15:9).

‘I can do all things through him who strengthens me’ (Philippians 4:13).

‘Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power’ (Ephesians 6:10).

‘The Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it’ (2 Timothy 4:17).

To this point Paul has been asking them to reflect on what happened to them. Now he asks them to remember what he and the other missionaries were like. As he wrote earlier: **‘our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with abundant effect’** (1:5). What did he gain out of it? They know how he was treated in Philippi (Acts 16:22-24).

They had witnessed for themselves his courage in proclaiming the gospel **‘in spite of great opposition’**. Luke, who was with Paul in Philippi (Acts 16:12), was among those who were deeply impressed by Paul’s courageous preaching, from the beginning at Damascus (Acts 9:27) to the end in Rome (Acts 28:31), and many times in between (Acts 9:28, 13:6, 14:3, 18:26, 19:8, 26:26). Luke is telling us that Paul spoke from the fullness of the Spirit that is upon him. He spoke about Jesus without fear or compromise.

1 Thessalonians 2:3

³For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery

The establishment of the Roman Empire in the East allowed for an ease and security in travel that had never been known before. This helped the exchange of ideas. 'Philosophers' were on the move peddling their theories and seeking converts. Not all did so for pure motives. It seems that when Timothy went back to Thessalonica from Beroea, he discovered that Paul's opponents were accusing him of peddling his fancy ideas for notoriety and personal gain.

Like his master, Jesus, the suffering servant of the Lord, 'there was no deceit in his mouth' (Isaiah 53:9). They know that Paul did not make money out of gullible converts. He did not use religion as a cover for indulging in immoral behaviour. He did not spend his time flattering those in power.

1 Thessalonians 2:4-6

⁴Just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please people, but to please God who tests our hearts. ⁵As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery, or with a pretext for greed; ⁶nor did we seek praise from people, whether from you or from others

In verse four ‘approved’ and ‘tests’ both translate the Greek δοκιμάζω. God does more than simply check as a method of quality control. God purifies in the crucible of suffering (see 1 Peter 1:6-7). Like Jeremiah, Paul could pray: ‘You, O Lord, know me; You see me and test me — my heart is with you’ (Jeremiah 12:3).

1 Thessalonians 2:7-8

⁷Though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ, we were **gentle** among you like a **mother** feeding and cherishing her own children. ⁸So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.

The Thessalonians would have remembered how **gentle** Paul was when among them ‘**like a mother feeding and cherishing her own children**’. We recall his plea to the Galatians who were abandoning Jesus for the security of Jewish observance: ‘**My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you**’ (Galatians 4:19).

These highly evocative images give us an insight into Paul’s character, and especially into his capacity for deep and gentle affection (compare Acts 20:31). In giving them the gospel, Paul, like his master, gave them himself.

1 Thessalonians 2:9-12

⁹You remember our labour and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you, while we proclaimed to you **the gospel of God**. ¹⁰You are witnesses, and God also, how reverent [ὁσίως], upright, and blameless our conduct was toward you believers. ¹¹As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a **father** with his children, ¹²urging [παρακαλεω] and encouraging you and pleading that you lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his **own kingdom and glory**.

Having likened himself to a mother, Paul goes on to speak of himself as their father, working hard to support them and teaching them all they need to live the life of a disciple of Jesus. The gospel which he proclaimed to them is '**the gospel of God**' (see also 2:2). It is 'of God' because it is from God, 'who was pleased to reveal his Son in me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles' (Galatians 1:16). It is 'of God' because it is about God and what God has revealed of himself in revealing his Son.

Paul reminds them that God is calling them into his 'kingdom' (see Galatians 5:21). This is a term frequently found on the lips of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels (see also John 3:3,5 and 18:36). It has its origins in the Hebrew scriptures which acknowledge God as the one to whom all obedience is ultimately owed. Included in the concept are the promises made to the Davidic dynasty and, with the collapse of the kingdom of Judah, the longing for God's Messiah to liberate Judah and to bring about the reign of God over all the earth. The New Testament sees Jesus as this Messiah and Jesus' disciples, including Paul, see the Christian community as God's instrument for achieving God's will 'on earth as in heaven' (Matthew 6:10).

We may get some insight into Paul's understanding of the term 'kingdom' by looking at the Gospel of Paul's disciple, Luke. The angel Gabriel is sent by God to announce to Mary that she is to conceive the Messiah, whose kingdom will never end (Luke 1:33). Jesus announces that his mission is to proclaim 'the good news of the kingdom of God' (Luke 4:43; see 8:1; 9:11). His disciples share this same mission (Luke 9:2,60; 10:9,11). This kingdom is enjoyed by the poor, who know their total dependence on God and cry to him in their distress (Luke 6:20). Wonderful as John the Baptist is, it is an even greater privilege to be a disciple of Jesus and to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God (Luke 7:28; 8:10), a kingdom that Jesus' contemporaries would see revealed in their lifetime (Luke 9:27). Being part of God's kingdom requires of us a wholehearted commitment to doing the will of God (Luke 9:62).

It follows that the more people respond in delight to the glory of God revealed (the more God's 'name' is hallowed), the more God's kingdom will be present in this world. It is for this that Jesus is giving his life, and he invites his disciples to share this mission and this prayer.

God is present in Jesus. God is to be radiantly and obviously present in the community of Jesus' disciples. The longing expressed in 'your kingdom come' will be fully satisfied only when all live as Jesus lives. No wonder Paul urges, encourages and pleads with the Thessalonians that they '**lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory**'.

1 Thessalonians 2:13

We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers.

- exterior and interior poles of human experience
- our longing for communion drives our longing to know
- longing is limitless. Partial satisfaction confirms it is real
- ultimately, our longing is for 'God'. It is 'religious'
- limited realities engage our longing for God = revelation
- Paul's 'words' were an inspired response to and vehicle of God's 'word'

‘Religious experience’ is another name for experience of ‘revelation’. God is communicating himself all the time to everyone in every experience. Sometimes we are insensitive. Sometimes we are distracted. But sometimes we are listening in the depths of our being. Sometimes the veil hiding us from God partly falls away and we penetrate a little further into the mystery of the divine. This insight, this experience, is the experience of revelation. Paul was inspired by the risen Jesus whose Spirit filled him and who had commissioned him to preach the Good News. When he did preach it, others were inspired by his words, and part of the veil covering their hearts and minds fell away as they recognised that the one about whom Paul spoke was the One for whom they were longing. God was speaking to them through the words of Paul.

In this passage Paul is referring to his spoken words. We have come to speak of his written words, including those in this letter, as 'the word of God', and for the same reasons. They too remain human words, for God deals with us through the human. They carry with them all the limitations of time, place and circumstance which human words cannot avoid. They must, therefore, be interpreted carefully with these limitations in mind. They do not cease to be human because they are vehicles of the divine, any more that Jesus ceased to be human because he was divine. To treat the words of scripture apart from their historical limitation is like ignoring the historical particularity of Jesus.

Raymond Brown in an article entitled '*And the Lord said: Biblical reflections on Scripture as the word of God*' (Theological Studies 42[1981] page 9) writes: 'The Bible is the literary objectification of a faith that is a response to revelation'.

Raymond F. Collins in the article on inspiration in the New Jerome Biblical Commentary (page 1033 #69) writes: 'Though canonized by long usage, 'word of God' should not be used of the Scriptures without further hermeneutical reflection ... A distance is to be maintained conceptually between the scriptural expression and the self-communication of God in itself, even in the case of the prophets. Theologically it is less confusing to state that the Scriptures witness to the word of God'.

The fact is that Paul's written words and the written words of the other works of the New Testament inspired the Christian communities in their response to God. They were copied, reflected on and cherished, as vehicles of divine communion. They revealed God, however imperfectly. The acceptance of these works by those who knew Jesus and by their disciples, provides a powerful guarantee to us, many centuries later, that these same words can be for us, too, 'the word of God', revealing God to us and inviting us into communion with him. This is true only to the extent that we understand them correctly, and that in reading them we are in touch with our own religious longings.

1 Thessalonians 2:14-16

¹⁴For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of the churches of God in the Messiah Jesus that are in Judea, for you suffered the same things from your own compatriots as they did from the Jews, ¹⁵who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out; they displease God and oppose everyone ¹⁶by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they may be saved. Thus they have been constantly filling up the measure of their sins; but God's wrath has overtaken them at last.

Paul speaks of the suffering inflicted on the Christians in Thessalonica by the people of their own city (see the second presentation for the troubles mentioned in Acts). He compares their suffering to that experienced by their brothers and sisters in 'the churches of God in the Messiah Jesus that are in Judea.'

Behind Paul's remarks is the memory of times when he and his missionary companions had to flee because of opposition from the synagogue. In the light of Paul's remarks earlier about the Thessalonians experiencing 'joy inspired by the Holy Spirit in spite of persecution' (1:6), it is interesting to note Luke's account of Paul's experience at Antioch in southern Galatia:

'The Jews stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their region. So they shook the dust off their feet in protest against them, and went to Iconium. And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit' (Acts 13:50-52).

It was members of the synagogue who were behind Paul having to escape by night from Thessalonica (Acts 17:5). They hunted him down in Beroea as well (Acts 17:13). Some years later in a letter to the Corinthians, he states: 'Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one' (2 Corinthians 11:2). He had plenty of experience to draw on.

Far worse is the opposition from Jews who try to ‘**hinder us from speaking to the Gentiles that they may be saved**’. Paul’s letter to the Galatians reveals the existence of a certain faction of Jewish Christians who opposed Paul’s mission to the Gentiles because he failed to insist on their following the law. There are also Jews who were not Christians who did not take kindly to this ex-Pharisee proclaiming a crucified criminal as the Jewish Messiah.

Paul understood their reasons, for he once persecuted the Christians himself. But having come to see the gracious gift that God is offering to all the nations in the gospel of Christ, and having answered the call to go out to the nations to preach this gospel, he sees what a terrible disservice these Jews are doing in opposing God’s will and attempting to keep from the Gentiles the message of salvation.

1 Thessalonians 2:16

Thus they have been constantly filling up the measure of their sins; but God's wrath has overtaken them at last.

In conclusion Paul refers again to 'God's wrath' (see 1:10). Something must have happened in Judea that Paul interprets as 'punishment' for their rejection of God's offer of grace. One hypothesis is that Paul is referring to the violent repression of the Jews in Judea under the Roman Procurator, Ventidius Cumanus (48-52AD). Or he may be referring to the coming parousia. Since it is imminent and inevitable, it is as though they already stand judged. Paul sees this judgment as something which they have brought upon themselves by rejecting the peace offered them by Jesus. He sees it as a sign of what will happen to them in the final judgment if they do not repent.

Paul cannot be blamed for those over the centuries who have taken his words out of context and used them to support their own anti-Jewish prejudices. Can the Psalmist be blamed for the devil's use of his words to tempt Jesus (Luke 4:10-11)? It is even worse to use Paul's words here, as some have done, to accuse Paul himself of being anti-Jewish. In the light of evidence from Paul's own writings, as well as from the portrait of Paul given us by Luke in Acts, such a claim is patently absurd.

I Thessalonians 2:17-20

¹⁷As for us, brothers and sisters, when, for a short time, we were made orphans by being separated from you – in person not in heart – we longed with great eagerness to see you face to face. ¹⁸For we wanted to come to you – certainly I, Paul, wanted to again and again – but Satan blocked our way. ¹⁹For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming [παρουσία]? Is it not you? ²⁰Yes, you are our glory and joy!

Once again expressing the depth of his affection for the Christians in Thessalonica (see 2:7-12), Paul explains that his longing to return to them has been blocked by Satan. He may be referring to the opposition that required his hasty departure from Thessalonica and the guarantee demanded of one of the Christian converts, Jason, to see that Paul did not again disturb the peace there (see Acts 17:9). Whatever the circumstance, Paul sees it as coming, not from God but from evil.

Paul speaks of the Thessalonians as his 'hope' (see commentary on 1:3), and his 'joy' (always, for Paul, a sharing in the joy of the Risen Christ, and experienced 'in the Holy Spirit', see 1:6). When he comes to the end of the race, they will be the wreath of victory placed on his head, and his 'glory'.

Paul introduces a word which will recur again in this letter: the word παρουσία, the 'coming of our Lord Jesus'. This is the word that would have been used in Thessalonica to announce the appearance of the proconsul, or of some other important personage from Rome. It had religious overtones, too, because of the practice of honouring the emperor as a god and because the procession led to the various temples where the local gods were honoured.

Paul is referring to the appearance in their midst of the one who reigns in heaven as king and whose kingdom is being established on earth through the proclamation of the gospel. When he appears, all will be revealed, and it will be shown that the Christians of Thessalonica are Paul's prize for the struggles that he has suffered in gaining them for Christ.